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## Geographies of affect in places of death and disaster: Tohoku, Japan, after 3.11

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Martini, A. (2019). *Geographies of affect in places of death and disaster: Tohoku, Japan, after 3.11*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. University of Groningen.

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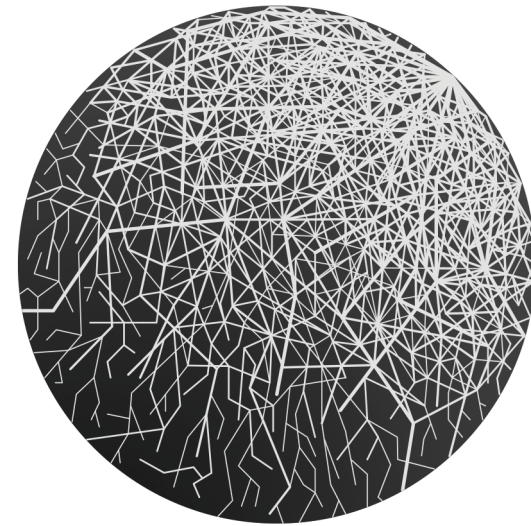
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## CHAPTER 1



## INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 TOURING DISASTER: AFFECT IN POST-DISASTER JAPAN

‘I am not a storyteller, but I write poems about the disaster sometimes’, says Mrs. Hirayama. ‘I try,’ she continues, ‘to express the gratitude I feel for those who helped us. More than talking about what we lost, I am grateful for the people that come from far away for us, that use their time for us, that help and support us not only physically but mentally. I write to tell them how much I am grateful’ (Ofunato, 29/08/2016). Mrs. Hirayama is one of the more than 400.000 people displaced by the 2011 Great Eastern Japan Disaster. This catastrophic event is often referred to as ‘triple disaster’, as it involves a magnitude 9.0 earthquake, a tsunami, and a nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, and caused almost 20.000 casualties in North-eastern Japan, primarily in the region of Tohoku.

Some fringes of the local population, exhausted by the disaster and the following recovery and reconstruction efforts, and unable to continue practicing their traditional means of livelihood such as fishing and rice harvesting, turned to tourism to gain economic revenue and find new opportunities. These tourism projects in towns that never had tourism before are still on-going and have been received with mixed results by the local communities. In academia, the label used to comprehend all the nuances of this phenomenon is *dark tourism* (Foley & Lennon, 1996), of which the so-called disaster or post-disaster tourism is considered a sub-category. Dark tourism is part of a resilient and adaptable industry, where devastation caused by disasters, death, and atrocity can become a tourist attraction (Korstanje & Clayton, 2012). A disaster may change the attributes and appeal of a place, and in dark tourism’s case often produces new economic ventures and opportunities to rebrand places following events of great loss and turmoil (Amujo & Otubanjo, 2012; Medway & Warnaby, 2008).

After March 2011, in disaster-stricken Tohoku, amidst thousands of national and international volunteers, a small part of domestic and international tourists started to appear in the region, not deterred by

the idea of visiting the devastated towns, once the immediate danger had passed, but enticed. While media often describe this phenomenon as motivated by intrusive and morbid curiosity, voyeurism, or plain disrespect for the suffering population hit by the disaster (Davis, 2018; Paris, 2016; Stokes, 2013), dark tourism studies developed more nuanced and complex approaches to this issue, producing work on motivations, senses, and emotions in dark places (Biran & Buda, 2018; Buda, 2015; Nawijn & Biran, 2018; Nawijn, Isaac, van Liempt, & Gridnevskiy, 2016; Robinson & Picard, 2012; Tucker, 2009, 2016; Waterton & Watson, 2014). What is still missing from dark tourism studies (and, to a lesser extent, also from the broader field of tourism studies) is a cohesive work on the volatile and subjective affects experienced in such places. In geographical work, affect is broadly defined as an other-than-conscious potentiality that can be brought on the surface (see Massumi, 2002; Shouse, 2005; Thrift, 2004, 2008), an intensity that when spiked, can become perceivable as emotion (Ngai, 2005). While some work has been published on specific affects such as hope and fear (Buda, 2015; Buda *et al.*, 2014; Pocock, 2015; Tucker, 2016; Willis, 2014), so far nothing has been written on the nexus between dark tourism and affect. A theoretical and empirical work on affects in dark tourism places can also benefit geographies of affect, by offering insights in intensities of affect that can be more prominently expressed in places of disaster, such as hope, catharsis, and the experience of the sublime.

This thesis aims to bridge this gap by proposing geographies of affect as a viable and useful frame to analyse the creation, management and experience of post-disaster tourism and heritage. To do so, I frame dark tourism studies within socio-spatial theories of affect, so as to better understand the affective layer of dark tourism, and how tourists' affects are negotiated in post-disaster tourism in Tohoku; how they are politically engineered by tourism workers and local stakeholders through processes of place-making; and the ways post-disaster sites are framed by news and information outlets to which the tourist has been exposed. Places of death, disaster and atrocities negotiate painful pasts, ethically problematic situations,

and strong emotional and affective reactions from locals and visitors alike. Tourists' affective responses to death and disaster have not yet been studied in-depth by academics (Light, 2017), but have the potential to elicit moments of intensity in the interaction with space, and such intensities can resonate with and be picked up by tourists.

The research questions that orient this thesis are:

- How are places of disaster constructed and negotiated for tourism purposes?
- How are post-disaster places in Japan lived and performed on an affective level and how do they shape the landscape in which tourists, locals and tourism workers move?
- What strategies and processes do local tourism stakeholders and governmental representatives employ to develop affective landmarks, narratives and practices in disaster tourism sites?

In addition to these guiding questions, my fieldwork experience in Japan brought to light an additional point of interest which has not been dealt with by academics in dark tourism and affect: the cross-cultural configurations of affects and emotions in post-disaster tourism. I acknowledge the subtle differences in the Western and Japanese affective experience of place, complementing theoretical and methodological material with empirical examples.

A framework that is based on affect studies can recognize not only the superficial, entertaining and titillating aspects of dark tourism, but draw out the ethical and political configurations inherent to dark places consumption, notably when processes of healing and reconciliation are still on-going. However, these controversial aspects must be balanced 'alongside tourism's more practical function as source of wealth generation that has the potential to help reduce poverty and (directly or indirectly) contribute to social healing' (Carrigan, 2014; p.240). A deeper understanding of the affects felt during such experiences, and on the emotions they produce, can not only shed a light on tourists' and locals' motivations to engineer and experience post-disaster sites, but also help better creation and management of such sites and their burdensome heritage.

## 1.2 TOHOKU AFTER 2011

This thesis explores the link between affect and dark tourism, focusing on affective moments in tours to disaster-hit coastal area of Tohoku, Japan. The area was devastated, on March 11, 2011, by a 9.0 magnitude earthquake, a tsunami of unprecedented height and violence, and a nuclear meltdown – caused by the tsunami – at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. In the Fukushima Prefecture, the 14 metres-high tsunami waves (TEPCO, 2011) overtook the seawall that stood as protection, and penetrated in the nuclear power plant, causing a partial meltdown in three of its six reactors. The population residing in a 30 kilometres radius from the power plant was evacuated, and a return is still not possible for many. The tsunami caused around 20,000 casualties<sup>1</sup>, and washed away entire towns. The so-called 2011 Great Eastern Japan Disaster produced at a local, national, and international level, severe consequences and changed forever the physical landscape of the Northern region of Tohoku – as well as national and international imagination of Japan as one of the most risk-prepared countries in the world. The long and difficult recovery and revitalization process also saw the growth of tourism projects at the local and national level. In Tohoku, most towns are *inaka*, rural areas marked by depopulation, backwardness, and isolation (Ivy, 1995), and excluded by the main tourism routes in Japan. After 2011, some of them put forward plan for long-term recovery based on post-disaster tourism, as a way not only to attract economic revenue and attention for the disaster, but also to create jobs to counter the centrifugal movement of young people leaving for the big metropolis.

A year after the disaster, following short-term recovery efforts (e.g. cleaning of debris on roads and town centres, assistance to victims, preparation of temporary housings), some towns decided to turn to tourism as one of the strategies for long-term recovery. To keep the memory of this massive disaster and its victims alive, many others proposed to turn certain disaster-related landmarks into heritage

<sup>1</sup> This number relates to the casualties accounted for, including those whose body was never found.

sites. Within a few months after the disaster, hotel managers reported the presence of occasional curious tourists and international volunteers (Muskat, Nakanishi, & Blackman, 2015). In 2013 local and national tourism industries, pressured to devise long-term strategies for revitalization, began considering the possibility of tourism to bring people and economic revenue back, advertise recovery efforts, and keep the communities visible. By the end of 2013, the NHK ((Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation) reported 23 tours involving five hundred participants to the nuclear evacuation zones (Good, 2016). Presently, post-disaster tourism has become one of the solutions put forward to contrast not only the short term devastation caused by the triple disaster, but broader issues accelerated by the disaster. In fact, several municipalities in the Tohoku region were faced with problems such as depopulation due to migration in the big cities, backwardness, economic strife (Gasparri & Martini, 2018), and, after 2011, delays in the recovery process. In 2017 at least 34,000 people still lived in temporary homes — mostly prefabricated structures intended to last just two years (Tanji *et al.*, 2018). Public and private figures with interests in tourism development in the region today form a complex and often not cohesive network. Institutional actors involved in the recovery took the disaster as an opportunity ‘to shape national interests (and possibly even national identity) and try to tilt the balance of history in the direction of their own choosing’ (Samuels, 2013, p.x), proposing projects and solutions often non-aligned with the needs of the local population, if not in open conflict.

These strategies aim to help economic recovery, construct memories and memorials that could potentially turn into long-term attractions, educate Japanese and foreigners about the disaster and its consequences, and give the opportunity to survivors to tell their stories, express, and possibly foster a beneficial environment to overcome their psychological and emotional trauma. Dark sites can be pivotal as a means to raise awareness, international sympathy and support for the recovery process (Evans, 2010). The development and management of post disaster places for tourism is a complex endeavour,

in which tourism workers join in an effort to rebrand the destination image of a place (Huan, Beaman, & Shelby, 2004), negotiate narratives on disasters (Hystad & Keller, 2006), and manage the negative perceptions of potential visitors (Sharifpour, Walters & Ritchie, 2014).

### **1.3 'I WANT TO BE WHERE IT HAPPENED': DARK TOURISM AND GEOGRAPHIES OF AFFECT**

During the past 20 years, dark tourism has established itself as a crucial cultural, economic and political phenomenon. The term has unclear borders, and refers broadly to visits to places of death, disaster and atrocity (Foley & Lennon, 1996). Dark tourism should be considered a brand and a buzzword useful to identify a specific interest in marketing and developing a tourism focus on the death or disaster occurred in the spot (Stone, interviewed by Baillargeon, 2016). Dark tourism as brand includes a wide and ever-changing variety of sub-definitions based on type of places, motivations, supply and demand factors, as well as providing multiple case studies to compare, contrast, and correlate to current understandings of visits to death and disaster places (see Lennon & Foley, 2000; Stone, 2006; 2013; Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Strange & Kempa, 2003; Cohen, 2011). One category usually included into the broader umbrella of dark tourism is post-disaster tourism, which refers to visits to places that have previously been subject to natural or human-made disasters (Amujo & Otubanjo, 2012). Post-disaster tourism places are also receptacles for the construction of memory and conflicts between the practice of heritage management and tourism (Carrigan, 2014). The issue of remembering tragedy in heritage sites and to whom memory is entrusted, is at the centre of academic debate surrounding truth and appropriate narratives broadcast by dark tourism sites (Stone, 2006). The strategies and plans developed show different purposes and outcomes, while at the same time they share an effort in creating physical landmarks as well as narratives that animate the personal understanding of dark and difficult places. Explorations of affective moments and responses in dark tourism places give insights in how

affective bodies can be object-targets for post-disaster place construction through narratives and landmarks, and that, while keeping an overarching theme of 'hope' and 'catharsis', different towns adopt different strategies to develop tourism. Affect has gained prominence as a quality of life that is always other-than-conscious and not easily representable (Pile, 2010, p.8). It can bleed into the experience of tourists, locals, tourism stakeholders, but also into narratives of heritage and memory, and greatly influence the ways in which post-disaster tourism and heritage are constructed and negotiated, as well as experienced by international tourists, tourism workers, and locals. These intimate, subjective encounters 'inform geographical analysis of material space, its surveillance, governance and affective possibilities' (Bell, 2007), and are crucial to define relationships of power and political implication (Gibson, 2012).

During the past two decades, geographies of affect and emotion have received increasing attention (Anderson, 2006; Anderson and Smith, 2001; Bondi & Davidson, 2004; Davidson 2003; Pile, 2010; Thien, 2005), but still remain underdeveloped in studies of dark tourism (Light, 2017). Encounters with death and disaster, however, are shaped by intense felt engagements that exacerbate a number of issues related to affect, especially when this concept, oftentimes thought of as purely abstract (Massumi, 2002), is applied to empirical case studies. In this thesis I follow Sianne Ngai's definition of affect and emotion as distinguished in intensity, not quality (Ngai, 2005). Strong affects have a potential that can be actualized, by coming to the surface of cognition and being apprehended as emotions (Ngai, 2005). The 'emergent character of affect, however, makes it difficult to pinpoint its appearance empirically. It is admittedly difficult to uphold the theoretical distinction between emotions and affect in practice' (Kaufmann, 2016). Against this backdrop, some geographers have introduced the concept of atmosphere (Adey, 2015; Anderson 2006; 2009; 2014; McCormack, 2008) to target the material, representable conditions of affective place-making. In geographies of affect, the concept of atmosphere is indebted to the work of Ben Anderson (2006, 2014), and Derek McCormack (2008) and their emphasis



on the existence of diverse active intensities in affective endeavours, often marked by intersubjective charge. Atmospheres offer a more flexible concept than affect, because it implies a space imbued with social, ethical, political charges that can be apprehended (Simondon, 2005), a vibe or mood (Ash, 2013) to which the tourist can attune. While atmospheres can contain affect(s), they are not synonyms, as to exist an atmosphere needs to be in contact with the body perceiving it (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2015) and it is always mixed with emotions, thoughts, bodily forces. Atmospheres, indeed, can be entered, perceived, attuned to. This notion offers a potentially prolific ground for analysis of empirical cases, as atmospheres can be perceived, and tourist can feel a charge that potentially elicits strong, definable reactions, like hope, empathy, pathos, and pity (Boltanski, 1999).

#### 1.4 METHODS

My fieldwork took place in the Fukushima, Miyagi, and Iwate Prefectures of the Tohoku region of Japan from March to September 2016, with a one-month follow-up in July 2017. I used qualitative methods, namely ethnography, participant observation, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and creative methods such as affective mapping and imagework. In total, I conducted 65 interviews, of which 26 with international tourists; 15 with travel agents, NGO representatives working on tourism-related projects, and local tourism workers not directly involved in guiding tourists; 15 interviews with tour guides for international tourists in the disaster area; and 9 interviews with locals and internationals living in the disaster area. Before the official start of my fieldwork, and in addition to these interviews, I acted as tour facilitator for a group of 12 Italian tourists in Japan. The tour included a 3 days visit to Tohoku, and in particular to the disaster-hit towns of Ishinomaki and Matsushima. After the experience, I conducted a group discussion with them, which served as pilot experience, allowed me to identify recurring themes in the post-disaster tourism experience of the group, and was an occasion to assess the possible points of improvement in my interview guide.

The age of the participants interviewed varied from 19 to 70 years,

and they were recruited using snowball sampling. The recruitment process started several months before the fieldwork, and continued until the summer of 2017. As tourism in this post-disaster area is still in its inception, I contacted all tourists I could find who visited the area, regardless of age and gender. I did not seek to recruit locals who experienced the disaster in first person, as this would represent an additional ethical challenge, which was not necessary for the scope of this thesis. However, while on fieldwork in the town of Ofunato, I was approached by three temporary housing residents, who wanted to tell me their stories. In that occasion, they gave a video informed consent, and I recorded their stories. I kept the interview questions broad and general, so that they could have agency over what to tell – and what to omit in such a delicate situation. The other locals interviewed also shared painful memories of the event and lost family members and friends, but they were away from the coast when the disaster happened, or moved to the disaster towns after March 2011. The latter falls into two categories: those who came as volunteers and decided to stay; and those who came to Tohoku to flee from the noise of the city, and start anew. Governmental and non-governmental institutions were contacted using emails to explain the scopes and methods of the research, and asking for their participation. Most local tourism workers and international tourists were recruited while on the field, or on social media.

If a participant did not wish to be identified but still agreed to be interviewed, their personal details were kept private and I used a pseudonym of their choosing. Some interviews with tourists took place after the tour, when some time had elapsed, either face-to-face a few days after the tour if the tourists were still residing in the area, or via Skype, when most suitable for the tourists interviewed. Material on the disaster and the recovery was also collected at the IRIDeS (International Research Institute for Disaster Studies) Archive for the 2011 Disaster, at Tōhoku University. Other online material was collected from Facebook pages, blogs of tourists, websites of travel agencies and individual tour guides, as well as the regional and national websites advertising tourism in the area.

The materials collected during the fieldwork have been transcribed and coded using the software Atlas.ti. The coding used aimed at extracting different layers of analysis: I isolated specific words which connected to emotions and affect in the email interviews I conducted, to better understand moments of affect and emotion found in textual material, as well as adjective and linguistic features of texts (see Chapter 2). For interviews collected verbally (either in person or via Skype), affect and emotions words were isolated and analysed, as well as expressions, anecdotes, personal stories, as well as my interpretation of verbal cues such as tone of voice and pauses in the interview. Anecdotes and stories have been analysed using a narrative approach, following the idea that tourism destinations are brought into being, at least in part, by being narrated into existence (Edelheim, 2015). Non-representational theories and methodologies, which are creative, subjective, and contextual, have been used to corroborate certain instances and to interpret the data collected. I analysed the ethnographic material by weaving together the ‘threads’ emerging from many of the stories, looking for narrative patterns that referred to actions, practices and bodily responses clearly related to moments of affect, and the atmospheres of such places. Complementing this material with field notes and participant observation sheds a light in some of the complex affective responses that characterize these experiences –and the way they are narrated (Tucker & Shelton, 2018).

## 1.5 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

This thesis is structured into 8 chapters. They cover configurations of different situations, events, and contexts related to post-disaster heritage and tourism-making, linked by the theoretical framework of geographies of affect. The current chapter, **Chapter 1** gives an introduction to the main themes, setting, theoretical framework, methods, and research question of the thesis. **Chapter 2** brings to the attention of tourism scholars new possibilities to theorize dark tourism as an affective encounter. Dark tourism is the broader umbrella under which post-disaster tourism is often analysed. The chapter proposes an overview of the links between dark tourism and affect, and routes

for research that are empirically explored in the following chapters. **Chapter 3** contributes to the methodological discussion on collecting and analysing data on international tourists’ emotions and affects. This chapter aims at clarifying one of the most controversial aspects of my methodology, which is the possibility of analysing fleeting and subjective moments of affect and emotion from written material.

The following chapters address the empirical part of my thesis. **Chapter 4** explores the heritage strategies in the towns of Kuji and Horinai, in northern Iwate, and the impulse to tourism after 2011 given by the *dorama* (morning television show) Amachan. This chapter does not delve yet into affect, but gives an overview on bottom-up management of locality and tradition in rural, post-disaster Tohoku, offering a general context that applies to most post-disaster towns in Japan. More importantly, it shows how such issues are deeply intertwined with post-disaster heritage-making and management. **Chapter 5** focuses on affective tourism negotiation in the town of Rikuzentakata, in Southern Iwate. A number of locals and tourism workers believe that the best way for this small town to recover is to promote tourism, especially foreign tourism, and brand the town as a sort of ‘Hiroshima of the North’. **Chapter 6** does not revolve around a specific location, but connects tourists’ and locals’ narratives in the Fukushima exclusion zone, in towns in the Miyagi and Iwate prefectures, by offering a glimpse into one specific affect: the sublime. I analyse how and when it is experienced by tourists and by Japanese locals and tourism workers. **Chapter 7** addresses a peculiar heritage-related situation that developed after the disaster, and its affective effects on post-disaster heritage and tourism –on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. From 2013, debris items of the 2011 disaster that have been retrieved in the United States and Canada, and sometimes sent back to Japan to be memorialized. An analysis of this process through the lens of geographies of affect shows how certain debris items are politically re-imagined and re-represented by national and international media as affective symbols of hope, resilience, and recovery. **Chapter 8**, the final chapter, summarizes the main results of the thesis, offering possible routes for future research.



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